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Research Article

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Evidence of New Geographic Localization of *Okapia Johnstoni* (Giraffidae) in Republic Democratic Of The Congo: The Rainforest Of “Nord Ubangi” District

Koto-te-Nyiwa Ngbolua^{1,4}, Mafoto A.², Molongo M.³, Magbukudua J.P.³, Ngemale G.M.³, Masengo C. Ashande⁴, Patrick Kondjo⁵, Yabuda H.³, Zama J.², Veke F.²

¹ Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, P.O. Box 190 Kinshasa XI, University of Kinshasa, D.R. Congo

² Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN Gbadolite), RD Congo

³ Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, University of Gbadolite. P.O. Box 111 Gbadolite, RD Congo

⁴ Scientific Committee for Research, Conservation and the Development of Biodiversity, Faculty of Science, University of Kinshasa, D.R. Congo

⁵ Ministry of the Environment, Nature conservation and Tourism, R.D. Congo

*Corresponding author: Associate Professor, Dr. Koto-te-Nyiwa Ngbolua, Tel.: +243 81 68 79 527, E-mail: jpngbolua@unikin.ac.cd

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ABSTRACT

The Okapi is an endemic species of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and is the national conservation symbol of the country. Because of poaching and the repetitive civil wars in the eastern part of the DRC, identifying new naturally occurring habitat of Okapi in others part of the country is a great challenges for the conservation of this great mammalian. The present communication gives for the first time the evidence of new geographic localization of *Okapia johnstoni* in the rainforest of “Nord Ubangi” district. The district is politically very stable, thus justifying the need to initiate a project for *in situ* conservation of Okapi in this area.

Keyword: *Okapia johnstoni*, Nord Ubangi, Democratic Republic of the Congo

INTRODUCTION

Okapia johnstoni is an ungulate endemic to Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and has been classified as ‘Endangered’ by the IUCN [1, 2]. It was reported that *O. johnstoni* is found only in the Ituri tropical rainforests of the DRC in central Africa, at altitudes from 1,640 to 3,280 feet (500 to 1,000 m) or higher. This animal holds iconic status in the Congolese culture. However, the species is under major on-going threat from habitat fragmentation, human encroachment, regional armed conflict and poaching [3]. *Okapia johnstoni* belongs to the Giraffidae family [3]. Recent report indicates that the enigmatic nature of this animal species is due to its elusive behavior, affinity for dense rainforest. The on-going political instability in eastern part of DRC limits valuable scientific research [4]. It is therefore necessary to search for new naturally occurring habitat of *Okapia johnstoni* for the in situ conservation of this endangered species. This includes a crypto-zoological research in “Nord Ubangi” dense rainforest where the presence of the cryptic animal was reported orally for decade. Although, the scientific evidence for the presence of such great and enigmatic mammalian in the “Nord Ubangi” forest is not available in the literature at today. The present scientific communication reports for the first time.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF *Okapia johnstoni* IN THE “NORD UBANGI” RAINFOREST

Anatomical proof: craniological indices (figures 1)



Figure 1: Behind sight, Side sight, Front sight

Morphological proof: dead collection



Figure 2: Behind sight, Side sight, Front sight

Ethnographic proof

Attitude and perception of *Okapia johnstoni* by the major local communities of the “Nord Ubangi”

Mbanza people:

Okapia johnstoni constitutes a divinity to venerate, consequently an animal to be protected. It is also considered as a symbol of peace and middle-class. The skin was the object of manufacture of the tom-toms, bed linen of the new-born babies and seat of the usual heads.

Ngbandi people:

Okapia johnstoni constitutes economic goods. For this reason, the animal is the subject of intense poaching. It also symbolizes the usual capacity. Its skin is used for manufacturing the royal chairs and decorating the palates.

The vernacular name of *Okapia johnstoni* is "Ndumba" (Ngbandi language) or "Ngbulu" (Mbanza language). The fact that this animal can have a local name among "Nord Ubangi" indigenous people proves that they know this animal since immemorial time.

SOME INDEXED SITES OF *Okapia johnstoni* IN THE "NORD UBANGI" DISTRICT

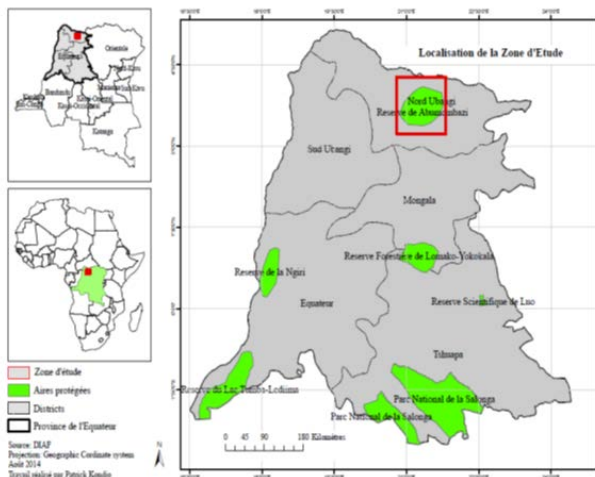


Figure 3. Location of the Reserve of Abumombazi (Nord Ubangi, DRC) Some sites in the "Nord Ubangi" District are recognized to harbor *Okapia johnstoni*. These sites are: Nyaki (12 Km of Gbadolite); Maniko (72 Km of Gbadolite); Loko (100 Km of Gbadolite); Bokunda (20 Km of Businga); Nzomboyi (20 Km of Businga); Kotakoli-Dondo (100 Km of Gbadolite); Eden-Canaan (40 Km of Gbadolite) and Tele (Bwato). Among these sites, Tele is located in the protected Reserve of Abumombazi located at approximately 280 km of Gbadolite city as indicated in Figure 3). This reserve

concentrates the great number of *Okapia* of the "Nord Ubangi" district.

CONCLUSION

In Africa, it is recognized that *Okapia* is endemic to the eastern part of DRC. However, its naturally occurring habitat is now more and more restricted because of the demographic pressure and the human activities such as poaching and the repetitive civil wars. It is therefore urgent to protect this species in other ecosystems of DRC where the species is also endemic particularly in the rainforest of "Nord Ubangi" as revealed/supported by the results of the present scientific communication. Indeed, contrary to the East part of DRC, "Nord Ubangi" district is politically very stable justifying the need to initiate a project for *in situ* conservation of *Okapia* in this district.

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